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Eastern philosophical approach

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Kandidaatin opinnäytetyön aiheena on tyhjiys ja erilaiset tyhjät tilat tärkeimpänä ominaisuutena visuaalisen viestinnän muotoilussa. Työ käsittelee tyhjyyttä itämaisten elämänfilosofioiden, kuten buddhalaisuuden, taolaisuuden ja zen-buddhalaisuuden kautta, ja pyrkii niiden avulla lähestymään tyhjän tilan käyttöä visuaalisessa viestinnässä.

Tyhjiys vaikuttaa elämässä alati läsnäolevana ja toisinaan huomaamattomana, mutta on myös elämän edellytys. Kaikki kiinteältä ja täydeltä vaikuttava materia koostuu atomeista, jotka ovat kuitenkin pääosin tyhjää. Tyhjyyden rooli arjessa ja esimerkiksi typografiassa saattaa jäädä helposti huomaamatta, mutta sen ajattelu voi kehittää suunnittelijan tyhjän tilan ja asetelmien ilmavuuden tajua uudesta näkökulmasta.

Yhteistä itämaisille tyhjyyksäilyksille on tyhjyyden ajattelu dynaamisena osana todellisuutta ja olemista. Länsimaissa tyhjiys usein koetaan jonkinlaisena epäolemisena ja kaiken ulkopuolella olevana asiana. Aktiiviset tyhjän ominaisuudet mahdollistavat itämaisessa ajattelussa kaikki maailman ilmiöt ja tapahtumat, jolloin tyhjiys muodostuu erottamattomaksi osaksi todellisuutta.

Visuaalisen viestinnän muotoilussa tyhjyydellä on monia eri rooleja sekä viestin ymmärrettävyyden että merkityksellisyyden muodostumisessa. Ilman riittävää tyhjää tilaa tekstin luettavuus kärsii ja keskeinen viesti voi jäädä välittymättä. Tyhjän tilan harkitulla käytöllä voidaan saada viestistä vaikuttavampi ja tuoda lisäarvoa suunnitteluun. Aktiiviset tyhjän tilan ominaisuudet tuovat asetelmiin dynaamisuutta ja ohjaavat katsetta olennaisiin elementteihin ja viesteihin. Eräänlaisten abstraktien tyhjyyksien avulla voidaan kuvaan luoda tila, jonka katsoja voi itse täyttää omilla kokemuksillaan, jolloin kuvasta voi tulla henkilökohtaisesti merkityksellisempi. Tyhjän tilan hyödyntäminen mielenkiinnon ja mielikuvituksen herättämisessä on myös tärkeä taito visuaalisen viestinnän muotoilussa.

Opinnäytetyö analysoi kirjallisuuslähteiden avulla tyhjää tilaa sekä itämaisessa ajattelussa että visuaalisen viestinnän muotoilussa. Lähteiden avulla pyritään kartoittamaan mahdollisia yhteneväisyyksiä aiheiden välillä ja hahmottelemaan tyhjän tilan tärkeyttä visuaalisessa viestinnässä itämaisten filosofioiden kautta.

Avainsanat tyhjiys, tyhjä tila, white space, taolaisuus, buddhalaisuus, graafinen suunnittelu

Emptiness as the most important quality in visual communication

-

Eastern philosophical approach

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Foreword

You hold in your hands the fruits of my long and winding Via Dolorosa of balancing university and work, second year studies and thesis writing. Like the author the thesis can appear slightly silly and abstract, but has pure intentions of stirring up thought and introducing new-ish viewpoints. Like in zen "*those who speak do not know, and those who know do not speak*", the thesis is scratching the surface of underlying themes, which in this context may not be well-known. I ask you to bear with me through the obvious and mundane uses and conceptions of emptiness, nothingness and void. Hopefully at the end we could touch something fresh and evoke new thoughts and approaches to graphic design.

Thanks to everyone who embarked on this journey with me: Aliisa, Anni, Iina, Iiris, Jenni, Kiira, Laser, Matias, Nils, Oona, Tintin & Veera.

Special thanks to Penni, Sanni, Joonas, Henna & Hanna.

1. Introduction

Emptiness is omnipresent and vital but sometimes hardly noticeable in our daily lives. All of the materia perceived as solid actually consists of empty spaces within and between atoms where electrons move on certain probability orbits. Many seemingly mundane things would lose their functionality with the removal of the void inside e.g. the cups would not hold water and living inside a house would be impossible.

The topic of the thesis is emptiness and the ways of interpreting emptiness and its states in visual communication. The main focus is on conceptions of Eastern philosophies on emptiness and how they could be used as tools for further comprehension of the field of visual communication design.

In graphic design the empty space is utilized in arrangements and layouts in order to create a light, breathable and dynamic design. Empty space can also be used to add value or emphasis. Space is paramount in graphic design but where does the importance originate? Could there be a way to grasp the absolute importance of empty space through Eastern philosophies?

Producing capturing and memorable content often relies on not revealing everything in the design. Rather we attempt to create a discussion with the viewer who can fill in the gaps themselves and make the visual experience more personal. Could Eastern philosophies offer new views as to why giving space to the viewer or reader is important?

The goal is to explore the empty spaces of graphic design and, if feasible, show that the empty spaces of visual communication correspond in importance to the empty spaces in atoms. Without it no solid design structures could be built. The thesis aims to evoke thoughts and broaden the visual understanding towards new, even esoteric, levels.

The research question the thesis attempts to answer is:

Are different empty spaces the most important quality of visual communication when viewed in Eastern context?

The research question can be further divided into:

1. How to interpret white space according to Eastern philosophies?
2. How to interpret the importance of emptiness in design through visible empty spaces?
3. How to interpret the importance of emptiness in design through abstract empty spaces which are connected to the audiences previous experiences, knowledge and intimate emotions?
4. Which opportunities Eastern philosophical view of emptiness in visual communication can offer?

Thesis does not aim to create a comprehensive system in understanding emptiness and nothingness in visual communication design but focuses exclusively on the concepts of void in Eastern philosophies and their relation to the field. The concepts are touched upon in Irene Salos Master's thesis "Beauty in Unexpected Forms". Salo approaches the subject from a point of Japanese aesthetics. While more Western approaches to the subject exist, like in the works in Roland Barthes, those discussions are omitted. Empty space in relation to physics and quantum mechanics is not discussed further within the scope of the thesis. In terms of visual communication the focus is mainly on white space and negative space though further research into other areas could be carried out. The research touches on creativity but does not attempt to discuss it at length but rather acknowledge the connection between emptiness and creativity.

The theoretical background introduces different views of void and emptiness in Eastern philosophies and visual communication referring to old traditional taoist texts such as Laozis Tao Te Ching and renowned translators of Eastern philosophies Alan Watts and Kazuo Okakura. Among others Finnish architect Tapio Peräininen's work is referenced as it offer a more spatial approach to the subject of emptiness. White space in graphic design is discussed among wabi-sabi aesthetics in order to establish the framework in which the philosophical approach is implemented.

The conclusions attempts to draw parallels between Eastern philosophies and the almost ingrained respect for empty space in graphic design. The qualities of void and white space are analyzed and compared to define the qualities of the space where graphic elements interact. The importance of emptiness in terms of legibility and breathability is discussed. Regard is given to incomplete and imperfect designs as a tool to pique interest, raise questions and generate communication between the viewer and the designer. The importance of emptiness in creativity is discussed briefly.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Emptiness and void in Eastern philosophies

2.1.1 Void in Buddhism and Indian thinking

The Buddhist or Indian views on void involves understanding the void as a part of reality and existence as opposed to the Western view of void as non-existent. Various schools of Buddhism have slightly different conceptions on void and emptiness but they share some common principles and doctrines.

The four seals of *dharma*, natural order, illustrate some basic shared principles of Buddhism. The second seal of *dharma* dictates the primal character of void in Buddhist philosophy. The seal states that no situation dependent phenomena has permanent or inherent existence¹. The lack of inherent existence makes all temporary phenomena essentially empty, even human beings are temporary and dependent incidents².

The Samkhya school of thought sees reality and void as energy³. The void is thought as a dynamic part of reality instead of something outside of existence. Although void has no characteristics and is beyond the human comprehension, void can be thought of and observed indirectly through its manifestations.

In Brahmanism human is seen as consisting of five different attributes: the body, emotions, sensations, conceptions, the will and self-awareness⁴. The five attributes are in constant state of change and dependent on each other, thus having no independent inherent being. It is impossible for the dependent attributes to amount to an unchangeable and clearly defined self. There can be no permanent and coherent composition that would correspond to the self. The empty nature of the self does not implicate that the person does not exist⁵ but rather what they are as a person.

In Mahayana Buddhism the void is seen as infinite and as something constructive which accounts for the existence of the universe. The Mahayana buddhists also define ten qualities of emptiness through which could be used as tools in understanding emptiness⁶. The first quality is of *no-obstruction*, which means that empty space knows no obstruction. No border, colour, wall or expression define the use of the space. It could be said that the

1. Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche.	4. Pasanen p. 55.
2. Pasanen p. 55.	5. Pasanen p. 56.
3. Pasanen p. 49.	6. Peräinen p. 40.

multifunctionality of an object creates non-obstructive empty spaces whereas the form and material obstruct it.

The second quality is the *omnipresence* of void, there is no place that is not reached by void⁷. Seemingly solid material is composed of atoms which for the large part contain empty space with probability spaces and nothing we observe as solid and real could not exist without the void. Empty space cannot be moved or erased but it can be temporarily filled.

The third characteristic of void is *impartiality* which at least in the context of empty space can be seen as having the potential of accommodating any function. According to Periäinen also bordered empty space can be seen as neutral and impartial within those borders⁸. The blank paper as an empty space has the potential to accommodate countless ideas, expressions and worlds within worlds, there is no limit to how the paper can be used. Notebook paper with a grid could be seen as somewhat limiting as to how one might write on it or construct a picture. The grid in this case is essentially a guide so ignoring it or using it in unconventional ways can lead to interesting aesthetic results.

The fourth characteristic is that of *broad and great* which is to say that void has no limits⁹. Some parts of empty space can be separated from it with the use of borders but terms such as narrow or limited cannot be applied to void. The separation of empty spaces from void with material means can often distort the importance of the emptiness to those spaces. The walls might be considered more important than the empty space within those walls though the empty space is what makes the room habitable.

The fifth quality is *formlessness* which in the context of empty space means that void can take form when bordered but when the borders are taken away the empty space remains¹⁰. In Indian thinking a few qualities are considered to be eternal basic elements: sound (*sabda*), touch (*sparsa*), form (*rupa*), taste (*rasa*) and smell (*gandha*)¹¹. The formlessness of void can be also seen as going beyond the rupa form, the form does not define the void nor can any form be attached to the void.

The sixth characteristic is *purity* which means that void has no afflictions¹². Empty space has no social, economical or aesthetic meanings, it remains pristine and pure. According to Periäinen some spaces with afflictions include a slaughterhouse and a cage¹³. Because void is also considered something that does no harm, e.g. in form of pollution, the places with harmful afflictions can never be void.

7. Periäinen p. 41.

8. Periäinen p. 42.

9. Periäinen p. 42-44.

10. Periäinen p. 44.

11. Periäinen p. 44.

12. Periäinen p. 45.

13. Periäinen p. 45.

The seventh quality of void is *stability*, which can be interpreted in many different ways¹⁴. The void which occupies the globe will remain even if it was filled with airborne pollution and all life would have disappeared. The void is not dependent on the temporal phenomena. According to Periäinen in the context of architecture the unstable empty space could be seen as a train, a ship, a tent or stage setting¹⁵. However the empty space would still remain even if the moving unstable structures were demolished so in a sense the concept of unstable empty space is just a temporal incident.

The eighth characteristic is the meaning of *void-being* which means the void has no dimensions¹⁶. According to Periäinen the opposite of void-being could be tools or structures which can be demolished but cannot be emptied or are not meant to be emptied¹⁷. The ninth characteristic is the *voiding-voidness* which is to say that void can be filled and thus is not attached to its emptiness¹⁸. The empty space can be both emptied and filled which also allows for the flow of life to move freely. The tenth quality is the meaning of *without obtaining*. This means that void or empty space can not be fully obtained even if it is separated and claimed by setting borders¹⁹. If the bordered space was to be moved or destroyed the void would remain and could not be moved. The void affects life "without affecting" but giving the space for the movement of life.

Philosopher Nagarjuna, who founded the Madhyamaka school of thought within Mahayana Buddhism approached void and the voidness of things through the relations of things to one another²⁰. The natural order and dhar-mas have on intrinsic form or being and can exist only in relation to each other and thus everything is relative and also void. The view of everything as empty does not implicate that the relations of phenomena would somehow be deceitful or trivial to existence. According to Nagarjuna phenomena that appears to exist can still cause real suffering²¹. Nothing can be said about the ultimate reality since it is beyond our comprehension and linguistic skills and has no intrinsic existence. Nagarjuna states that if everything had a permanent existence no change or movement would be possible within the plane of existence²². But precisely because everything is void of existence actions can take place. Nagarjuna's thoughts come close to the taoist view of void which is discussed in the chapter 2.1.2.

Void and empty spaces in Buddhism are seen as enabling and inclusive, allowing for any action to potentially take place. In contrast to the Western view of void and empty places tends to lean toward interpretations which depict emptiness as dull and uninspiring, the buddhist view emptiness as inviting and pure.

14. Periäinen p. 45.

15. Periäinen p. 45.

16. Periäinen p. 45.

17. Periäinen p. 46.

18. Periäinen p. 46

19. Periäinen p. 46.

20. Pasanen p. 62.

21. Pasanen p. 63.

22. Pasanen p. 64-65

2.1.2 Void in Taoism

In Taoism void is seen as a crucial part of the world which allows the existence of all the living beings. The thought of harmony through opposites yin and yang could be the most recognized taoist idea but the concept of void can be considered just as important. The void in Taoism is seen as an omnipresent dynamic and active property²³.

The role of the void in the harmonious and whole system which includes the world and reality is explained in Taoism by using the formula $2=3$, $3=1$ ²⁴. The world is in balance because of the relationship of yin-yang which in the formula is expressed by the number two. At the same the world is also in a state of dynamic change so two becomes three, $2=3$. Despite the dynamic and ever changing nature of the world it remains intact and complete and three becomes one, $3=1$. The first level of the void being the primal, original state of being is seen in the equation as number one. The first level of the void gives birth to the balance of the yin and yang but the second level enables yin and yang to complete each other and create harmony and give the breaths of life to all living beings. The void is thus inseparable from reality and cannot be regarded to as something non-existent beyond reality.

The way void functions in Chinese thinking, *wuwei*, can be considered "affecting without affecting". Affecting without affecting is also shared in buddhist thoughts and concepts on emptiness (see also chapter 2.1.). The void does not directly affect or contact anything but it allows things to take shape and move freely within reality and enabling life to happen. According to Pasanen the void can be positioned on two levels in Chinese thinking, the state from which the world emerged from and the state in which the phenomena of the world happens²⁵. The "affecting without affecting" on the state in which all the phenomena happens is of more interest in the context of visual communication. In Taoism life is expressed as the movement of the spirit of life, the breath of life. Like in Buddhism void enables all the actions and phenomena and thus enables life²⁶. Space is paramount to the movement of the spirit of life, which moves also within paintings breathing vitality and soul to the elements. The *wuwei* could be seen in pictures where the empty space between the elements balances the whole and could add e.g. dynamic movement, calming stability or an air of mystery.

23. Pasanen p. 91.

26. Pasanen p. 99.

24. Pasanen p. 97-98.

25. Pasanen p. 95.

The sense of time and place in Taoism is also intertwined with void. The perception of time is a two-way one though it does not contain thoughts of time moving backwards. Time moves from one plane to another and the end on one level contains a beginning on another, which can be illustrated by a spiral²⁷. The taoist perception of time also contains the perception of space and phenomena happening in time is also seen as something happening in space. Empty spaces in time and space create a dynamic rhythm to linear time and allows the breath of life to flow in space and time.

Laozi (also transliterated as Laotse) a renowned taoist philosopher, approaches the importance of emptiness through a verse which discusses the emptiness of things as the quality that makes them functional. In the verse the spokes form a wheel but the center hole of the wheel makes it useful²⁸. The empty space within a clay pot enables its use, the material is useful only in the sense that it creates the empty space within. In the verse wood is used for a house but a house made of solid wood would not be inhabitable since there would be no empty space on the inside. The verse illustrates on a practical level how void and emptiness is often the most important quality of solid things is actually the empty space inside. The substantial matter is obtained and shaped to have a certain form, but emptiness, which cannot be grasped, defines the practicality and versatility of an object. Laozi's thoughts on void approach Nagarjuna's thoughts about a void is enabling through its emptiness and temporary nature. Void contains everything and thus actions can take place in the plane of existence.

According to strategists Miyamoto Musashi it is paramount to distinguish the difference between void and confusion²⁹. Confusion can sometimes be perceived as void since confusion consists of things which are not yet grasped by the confused person. Void however is something that is not comprehended or known by man, void is non-existent. According to Musashi the real void lies behind the clouds of confusion. Musashi claims that void is a virtue and evil does not exist in void³⁰. This differs from the buddhist views that see void as neutral and impartial.

From a taoist viewpoint void can also be seen in art and visualizations as more abstract concept³¹. The void can be seen as something that is hinted towards or left to the viewers imagination. The viewer can fill this void with their own knowledge, associations and emotions, which can make the experience more personal and more meaningful. In visual communication the abstract empty spaces are often used to keep the design more flexible

27. Pasanen p. 100.

28. Laotse p. 11.

29. Musashi p. 103.

30. Musashi p. 104.

31. Okakura p. 48-49.

and interesting. Offering all the information and visual cues or using a demanding tone in design can easily appear outdated, like an old advertisement in a magazine. By utilizing the abstract empty spaces created for example through hinting, leaving things unfinished or hidden the viewer gets to interact with the design and the designer.

2.1.3 Emptiness in Zen Buddhism

Zen Buddhism, which is practiced in China and Japan, is born from Mahayana Buddhism and taoism with some differences concerning enlightenment. In zen buddhism enlightenment could be realized immediately without a gradual awakening since it is believed that a purposeful search for enlightenment could obscure the goal and make enlightenment impossible³². Though some buddhist schools of thought, such as tantric buddhism, also share the idea of faster enlightenment. Enlightenment is possible anytime because buddha mind is present in everything³³.

Zen buddhism can often be seen as a practice which aims to establish an indifferent attitude towards the world but the core of zen buddhism strives toward the sameness and integrity of the world³⁴. Both sides of things are intertwined and there is no good without evil and no pleasure without pain. Zen arises from abolishment of pursuing goals such as pure goodness, the goal of an action should not be considered more precious than the current moment³⁵. The idea of zen is to get to our inner workings without abstraction or external qualities, faith is placed on one's inner being³⁶.

The main difference of Zen Buddhism and Nagarjuna Buddhism concerning void is the existence of things and reality of the world. Life is real and reality and thus reality is life. Life is a coherent whole with the defining characteristic being oneness. The oneness is universe and it has all the qualities of life, but the universe is beyond the qualities, void of qualities in itself and is thus empty³⁷.

Often zen could be seen as a more direct action than meditation and can be described as "no-mind" *wu-sin* and "no-thought" or "no-specific-thought" *wu-nien*³⁸. *Wu-sin* is not seen as something unintelligent but rather as action that is performed without attempting to see or analyze the said action from the outside³⁹. Someone practicing *wu-sin* does not stop in a pleasurable situation to assess whether they are getting as much joy as possible from the situation. Also the concept of "no-action" or "no-effort" *wu-wei* is connected to zen as a path of reaching emptiness. "No-action" does not mean passivity but action

32. Watts p. 102.

33. Pasanen p. 105.

34. Watts p. 141.

35. Watts p. 152.

36. Suzuki p. 14.

37. Pasanen s. 174.

38. Watts p.167.

39. Watts p. 168.

40. Pasanen p. 105.

without a predetermined goal⁴⁰. This kind of free association and immediate reaction to things illustrates that zen cannot be grasped by thinking about it but rather in a state of emptiness. Realization of emptiness and enlightenment in zen buddhism is achieved through breaking the dualisms of self, subject-object, mind-body, doing-thinking and focusing on the inner being. During the enlightenment the buddha mind becomes one with void and the enlightenment perseveres because void cannot be divided⁴¹.

2.1.4 Void in wabi-sabi aesthetics

The birth of wabi-sabi, a Japanese aesthetic and philosophical universe, is associated with Zen Buddhism⁴². Wabi-sabi aesthetic often contradicts the qualities of conventional beauty and sees the allure in imperfection and incomplete. Because of the anti-rationalistic and direct nature of Zen the concept of wabi-sabi is not clearly or easily defined⁴³.

The introduction of wabi-sabi to the Japanese tea ceremony and life could be said to be brought about by tea master Rikyu⁴⁴. Rikyu's aesthetics geared towards traditional understated, Japanese made objects, as opposed to shiny, decorated and slick Chinese objects. Ruggedness, personality and texture are considered more beautiful. Functionality and more personal nature of the objects has remained an important part of the tea ceremony.

Wabi-sabi comes in contact with nothingness and void as a quality of an object evolving from or devolving towards nothingness⁴⁵. Wabi-sabi could be said to manifest itself as traces of something just on the border of nothingness, maybe even reaching and bringing forth some qualities of void. In aesthetic terms things which are evolving from nothingness can be lighter, brighter, clearer and slightly more stunning/arresting than those devolving towards nothingness. Often it can be difficult to distinguish between evolving and devolving things but devolving things can be seen as darker, more subtle and more murky or blurred⁴⁶.

40. Pasanen p. 105.

41. Pasanen p. 105.

42. Koren p. 15

43. Koren p. 15-16

44. Koren p. 33.

45. Koren p.40.

46. Koren p. 45.

2.3 Emptiness in visual communication

2.3.1 White space

In visual communication and graphic design empty spaces are referred to as white space or negative space. Despite the name in graphic design white space is not necessarily white, white space can be coloured or even have a pattern. In theory colour or pattern does not limit the properties of white space though in practise the colour of the white space or background sets some limitations in terms of readability and coherence.

White space includes all the empty spaces between the design elements but can be further separated into active white space and passive white space⁴⁷. Active white space is a purposeful part of the design and can introduce structure and dynamic construction to the design. The empty spaces that occur more organically are passive white space, which can be letter-spacing, line-spacing or the space surrounding an element.

White space can also be classified by size into micro and macro white space⁴⁸. Micro white space occurs between two different elements which are close to each other and can include e.g. letter-spacing. Micro white space can be added to make the design lighter but the format or size of the elements does not allow the addition of white space outside the element. Macro white space is used when the white space is more generous and occurs e.g. between graphic elements, columns or paragraphs. Macro white space can be considered an element by itself since it can provide movement and lightness to the design.

The use of negative (empty space) and positive space (filled space) in design can be thought of as a zen-like harmony between yin and yang⁴⁹. The empty space can be utilized to guide the eye through the design organically and with ease. Having enough white space in a design will calm the whole even if it has a variety of different elements and information.

47. Printward.

48. Printward.

49. Golombisky & Hagen.

2.3.2 Uses of white space

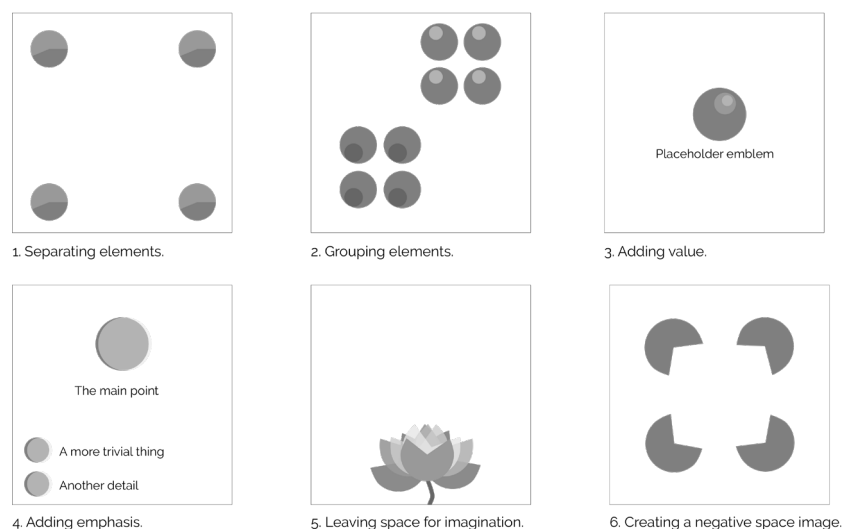
White space is utilized in graphic design in multiple ways and can be a powerful tool of communicating and directing attention (Figure 1). The obvious use of white space is to group elements together and on the other hand separate elements from each other⁵⁰. Having ample white space surrounding an element e.g. an emblem communicates value and sophistication through minimalism.

White space around the elements can add emphasis and guide the eye to focus on the important parts of the design⁵¹. Busy or crowded design can interfere with the message and the impact of the design so having enough white space ensures that the core message does not get scrambled.

Leaving white space in design can also pique an interest or provide space for imagination⁵², which can attribute to the emotional value of the design by making it more personal.

Another more practical way of utilizing the white space is to make use of the negative space and shapes⁵³. The elements of design or white spaces within design can be used or manipulated to create a recognizable negative space. In Shigeo Fukuda's poster design both negative space images and illusions are used masterfully to introduce movement and playfulness (Picture 1).

Uses of white space in design applications



White Space in Graphic Design, and Why It's Important (2012). Michigan: Printward, Inc.
<https://www.printward.com/blog/white-space-in-graphic-design-and-why-its-important>
 Referenced 11.4.2019

Figure 1. The use of white space in design applications.

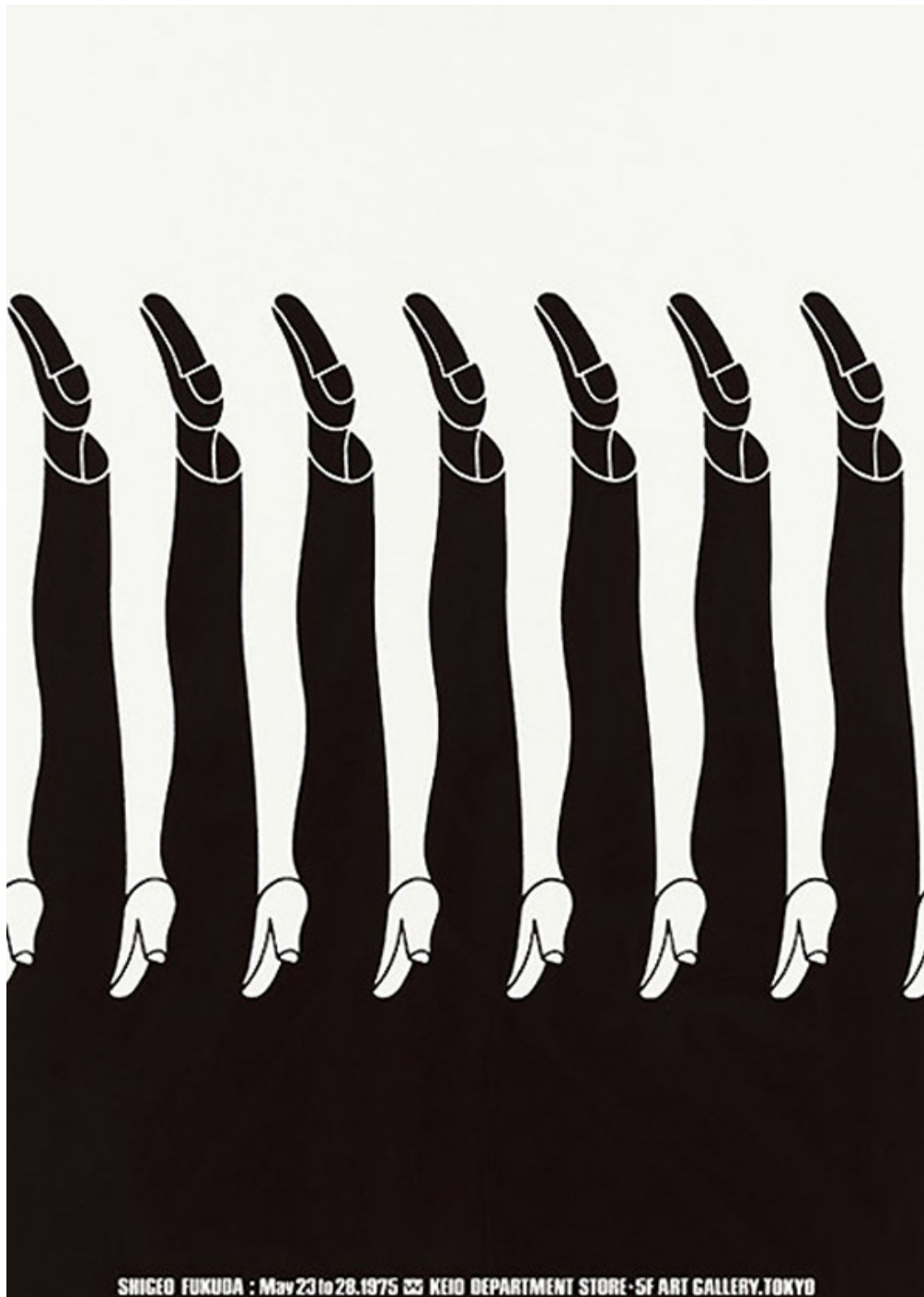
Figure: Inka Salminen.

50. Printward.

53. Printward.

51. Printward.

52. Printward.



Picture 1. Poster design by Shigeo Fukuda. The intelligent use of negative space images creates an arresting, dynamic but yet harmonious design.

3. Conclusions

The conclusions first introduces comparisons between white space and different views of void to further connect the qualities white space adds to design to the Eastern philosophies. White space is compared to the buddhist and taoist views of void. The second chapter touches on utilizing emptiness in design through wabi-sabi aesthetics. The importance of white space and other forms of actual and substantial emptiness are discussed briefly in the third chapter. A more abstract quality of emptiness in visual communication is considered in the fourth chapter. The final chapter involves a discussion on the importance of emptiness on creative work in the form of breaks and free flow of thoughts.

3.1 White space versus void

White space and the buddhist view of void can be considered to share some characteristics but are in essence quite different (Table 1). In order to approach white space as nothingness or void it is important to determine which characteristics apply (See also chapter 2.1.1). White space could be seen as a phenomenon which occurs on physical or digital surfaces, often as a result of intent to place elements on the surface. Some mediums, such as paper, contain white space since the one of the original intents of the blank paper is to be filled in one way or another.

Table 1. The qualities of buddhist view of void compared to the qualities of white space.

Quality	Void	White space
No-obstruction	X	X
Omnipresence	X	
Impartiality	X	X
Broad and great	X	
Formless	X	(X)
Purity	X	
Stability	X	(X)
Void-being	X	X
Void-voidness	X	X
Without obtaining	X	

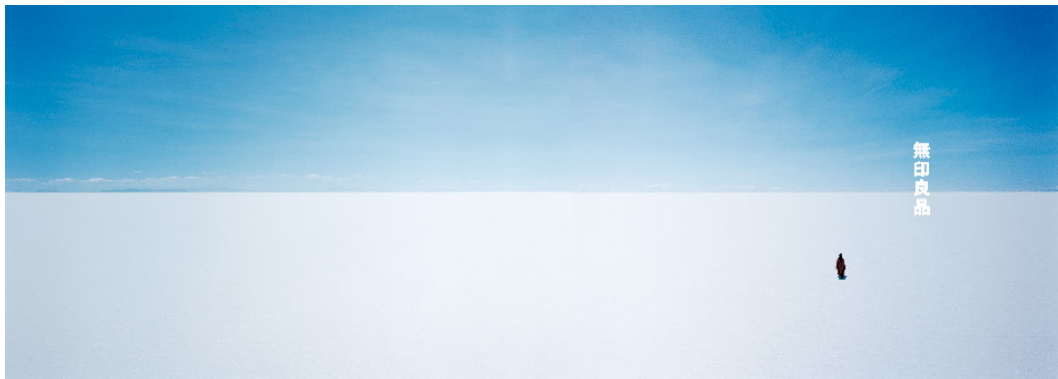
The quality of *no-obstruction* is applicable to white space in the sense that white space will retain its qualities even if it is coloured or has a pattern. The omnipresence of the void does not directly translate to the omnipresence of white space. The occurrence of white space could be seen to require a conscious action to affect a certain surface or plane so the its omnipresence is not evident in the way that void is omnipresent. It could be argued that the white space itself is as a phenomenon dependent on the intent of conscious mind so white space might only actualize when that intent is applied.

The *impartiality* of the void is also present in white space. White space can contain potentially anything, though the shape of the canvas can imply a certain design format but white space remains impartial to the content. It is equally possible to utilize the white space for spreading information and calls to action as for example fake news.

The quality of *broad and great* cannot be directly applied to white space; while the white space can be considered to extend beyond the format, the limits of this extension may need further consideration. The extension of white space might not be generally considered limitless like void but in theory it could be a plausible thought. While the terms "narrow" and "limited" cannot be used about void they can be useful in describing white space or negative space, for example the micro white space in letter-spacing.

The quality of *formlessness* is also debatable since white space could be seen as a phenomenon occurring within certain forms whether established print formats or web layout formats. Contrarily it could be argued that white space can occur without the predetermined form, white space can occur on the skin while designing tattoos or on the wall while painting murals. White space could be said to occur where there is an intention to utilize design elements in relation to each other irrespective of the purpose of the design.

Whereas void has *no afflictions* white space could be said to have at the least aesthetic meanings. White space can be used to convey value and luxury so it is not void of economical meanings either so the purity of white space is ultimately not comparable to the purity of void. For example posters created by Kenya Hara for Muji utilize white space beautifully to introduce an immersive experience and a sense of purity (Picture 2.3). They allow for the eye and mind to wander and manage to convey the simplistic but highly functional ideology and aesthetic of the company. Despite the purity conveyed through simplicity and colour the aesthetic and economical meanings remain.



Picture 2. Horizon, 2003. Muji campaign poster.
Art direction: Kenya Hara, photography: Tamotsu Fujii.



Picture 3. What happens naturally, 2006. Muji campaign poster.
Art direction: Kenya Hara, photography: Yoshihiko Ueda.

White space may not possess the same *stability* as void since white space often occurs on physical planes. Thus white space can be considered to be permanently occupied when an element is printed or drawn on the paper. In the world of digital design however the stability of white space is probably more approachable because the elements are not absorbed or adsorbed to the white space plane. The elements are not necessarily permanent in the way they would be in physical world so their temporary nature is easier to grasp. However if the ink on the paper fades away the white space which occupied the space before is still there.

The characteristic of *void-being* can be applied to white space since white space is also void of restrictions. The quality of white space is void and thus white space has emptiness which has countless potential possibilities. Having countless possibilities is also the primal quality of void.

White space could be argued to have the quality of *voiding-voidness* which means that it can be filled and respectively emptied. The quality of meaning *without obtaining* applies to white space only partially, white space affects without affecting within the design. When it comes to obtaining white space it is possible if white space manifests on a physical object whereas obtaining void is not possible.

White space could be seen as relating more to the taoist view of void (Table 2). When analysing a design care is taken to assess its breathability and dynamic qualities which correspond to the very fundamental taoist views of void.

In Taoism the active and dynamic qualities of void are among the most important. Active white space is created by carefully considering the positioning of the design elements and the areas of white space. The active white space contributes to the dynamics of the design in similar ways as void affects everything in taoist thinking, allowing for the breath of life to move freely and add pause to the flow of visual information.

White space affects the design without affecting, much like the empty spaces in traditional Chinese ink painting. White space between the elements allows for the breath of life to flow in the design. Like in accomplished painting of a zen master the consideration of white space and balance is absolutely essential to good design.

The quality of affecting without affecting could be said to directly contribute to the inseparability of white space or void from reality. Though white space or negative space may appear to be just empty without a function at the first glance, closer inspection often reveals the function of the white space which in turn intertwines it with reality.

Table 2. The qualities of taoist view of void compared to the qualities of white space.

Quality	Void	White space
Active	x	x
Dynamic	x	x
Affects without affecting	x	x
Exists on two levels	x	
Inseparable from reality	x	

In conclusion white space shares qualities with both buddist and taoist views of void and emptiness. The taoist approach to white space appears more useful as the active and dynamic properties are observed in both. The idea of the breath of life is in general very practical in design in order to avoid overcrowding and smothering the design with too many elements. As a young designer I see advantages of adopting a taoist approach since practicing restraint with layouts and arrangements is always useful and welcome.

3.2 Visual elements utilizing emptiness and wabi-sabi æsthetic

The idea of imperfect and unfinished as the driving forces in wabi-sabi aesthetic can often be impactful on both actual and abstract levels. The ways of implementing elements of wabi-sabi in a design can include unfinished elements, such as sentences or pictures, the use of colour in faded, muted and murky shades, the use of texture as such and also to convey a feel of ruggedness, imperfection and age. The unfinished line or picture often leaves space for imagination and a more personal connection with a piece of design or art⁵⁴. Though it could be argued that often the intentional implementation of mistakes and imperfections can seem slightly false and hollow the accidental mistakes and surprises bring life and soul to design, e.g. illustration.

3.3 Different manifestations of emptiness in visual communication

The importance of emptiness in visual communication design could be approached on two levels, the *actual emptiness* and the *abstract emptiness*. Actual emptiness in terms of visual communication includes different micro white spaces such as letter-spacing, space within the letters and space between the graphic elements. Abstract emptiness approaches Okakuras thought on emptiness within art and the appreciation of emptiness in Chinese painting. While actual emptiness deals with things which can be seen and perceived by everyone in relatively similar ways the abstract emptiness involves more conceptual and intimate things which relate to personal knowledge, experience and emotions. In visual communication this abstract emptiness could manifest itself in posters, advertisements, campaigns and slogans.

The actual emptiness could be seen as the emptiness of a vessel where the material or lines outside allow for the emptiness inside to make the vessel functional. In typography the actual void is what makes the letters, sentences and lines legible. Without the emptiness or white space between the letter text would eventually become illegible (Figure 2.).

54. Altair.

If the space between the lines was to diminish or disappear
one way or another the legibility of the text would suffer.

The distinguished shapes of the letters would become more and more obscure.

Words would blend with each other and the shapes would
create new associations and meanings which could deviate
of shape static original. The message would be lost in a sea



Figure 2. Demonstration of the importance of actual emptiness in form of white space inside the letters and in letter-spacing.

"If the space between the lines was to diminish or disappear one way or another the legibility of the text would suffer. The distinguished shapes of the letters would become more and more obscure. Words would blend with each other and the shapes would create new associations and meanings which could deviate notably from original. The message would be lost in a sea of shape static. In the end the text might as well resemble a collection of thick parallel lines follow one another like snakes. The lack of empty space would render the text and the message incomprehensible." Figure: Inka Salminen.

The abstract emptiness could be seen as a quality that brings the so-called soul to the design. In Chinese landscape painting the preservation of the mystery of the scenery is one of the guiding principles and empty spaces within the painting contribute to the mystery and rhythm⁵⁵. Skillful and restraint use of empty spaces in Chinese painting can also be a sign of the intelligence and consideration of the painter⁵⁶. Also in visual communication too commanding and crowded approach might be considered too informative and maybe even brutal. While the mystery of the landscape can be very esoteric in nature, the concealed properties of e.g. an illustration can also play with the elements of surprise and discovery. The abstract emptiness gives the landscape a mystical feel but the same void enables the viewer to connect with an illustration because it allows the movement of thought and interpretation. The use of partial elements in illustration or painting leaves actual empty spaces on the page but also directly contributes to the abstract void within the the work. The abstract void elevates the work to a deeper, more meaningful and more spiritual plane, which can be desirable in article illustrations or some marketing applications. The abstract void is not tied to pictures or illustrations but can also manifest itself in copywriting.

55. Pasanen p. 137.

56. Pasanen p.137.

3.4. Emptiness and zen in the creative process

The connection between creative thinking, cognitive performance and taking breaks has been studied previously^{56, 57}. Introducing moments empty of goal oriented actions could also prove to be beneficial to the creative process. Implementing the emptiness of zen-buddhism in the form of "no-thought", as a free flow of associations might help in coming up with creative solutions and visuals. At least in my personal process the sudden, immediate associations in surprising situations which follow the information-heavy, extensive research, often give a spark for the more creative and fresh ideas. The constant pondering and thinking about the subject might induce a similar reaction as in people searching for zen, the more you think about it, the farther it escapes from you. In order to balance all the information needed for the design the designers thoughts need to be empty from time to time so new ideas could flow in. An old zen proverb of a zen master offering tea to a scholar, who has sought the master out in order to achieve enlightenment states that the occupied mind cannot hold any more information if it is not emptied of the old opinions and conceptions first. The proverb holds true not just in visual communication but in life as a whole.

In conclusion emptiness could quite easily be seen as the most important aspect of visual communication design, and probably in various other fields as well. Utilizing both actual and abstract sides of emptiness the designer can produce designs which succeed both in communication and connection. Although extensive further research would be required in order to make more solid conclusions it could be stated that consideration of emptiness in design makes for more impactful and memorable design. The graphic designers intellect and diligence considering emptiness and white space could be an interesting prospect for multidisciplinary research.

56. Oppezzo et al.

57. Patel et al.

4. Recommendations for further research

Further studies on the subject could be executed by surveying the thought on and understanding of emptiness in visual communication. Areas of interest include the development of the use of empty space in design and whether the understanding of empty space is in general highly refined within the field of visual communication design. Longitudinal study methods could be utilized in observing the use of empty space in the same group of graphic design students from the first year through the third.

Wider literary studies could broaden and sharpen the conception of abstract void in design. Study could include various and multidisciplinary fields from graphic design to literature and movies.

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